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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION PARTY CANDIDATE TO FACE THE MAYOR OF ZAGREB IN
SECOND ROUND PRESIDENTIAL RUN-OFF

REF: ZAGREB 756

1. (U) Croatians voted in the first round of presidential elections on December 27. Turnout for the rainy, post-Christmas vote was low, at only 44 percent (down from 52 percent five years ago). The top two vote getters were Ivo Josipovic, candidate of the main opposition Social Democratic Party (SDP), who received 32.4 percent of the vote, and the populist Mayor of Zagreb, Milan Bandic, who received 14.8 percent. The lone candidate from the ruling coalition government -- Andrija Hebrang of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) -- was edged out of the run-off by Bandic. Hebrang in his concession speech noted that a crowded field with two ex-HDZ members running as independents as well as three other right-of-center candidates had likely cost him the votes needed to make the run-off. The leading Croatian NGO monitoring the elections, GONG, reported that the vote went smoothly, with only minor problems or irregularities in polling places.

2. (U) Josipovic and Bandic will square off in the second round on January 10. That race should be much closer than the first round results indicate. While Josipovic can likely count on the 11 percent of votes cast for two liberal candidates in the first round, voters for several more conservative candidates eliminated in the first round are more likely to gravitate to the populist Bandic than to the left-of-center Josipovic. A further plus for Bandic could come from the diaspora vote, where Josipovic garnered only 5 percent support. Diaspora turn-out tends to be low -- it was only 16 percent on Dec. 27 and amounted to only 3 percent of votes cast. But a rise in turn-out among BiH Croats on January 10 could give a boost to Bandic, who was born in Herzegovina, in a close race. Higher turnout in Croatia proper, however, according to recent polling, would favor Josipovic, who can count on a solid SDP base. We expect turnout in the second round will be higher, given that it will be held further from the holidays and most voters who may have traveled for the holidays will be back home.

3. (SBU) The key themes of the second round were already apparent in the candidate's election night comments to the press. Josipovic will focus heavily on his anti-corruption message, and raise questions about Bandic's ethics. Josipovic told reporters the Jan. 10 vote is a choice "between lightness and darkness." Bandic, a long-time SDP member ejected from the party when he declared his independent candidacy for president, will argue that Josipovic is a "puppet" of the SDP party leadership, and is not representative of the broader range of Croatian voters. On foreign policy, both candidates are strongly pro-EU and reliably pro-NATO. Bandic's BiH connections might make him more sympathetic to Bosnian Croat positions in debates on BiH constitutional reforms (reftel).

WALKER